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## **Sacred status of Qawali in Chishtiyya order: A case study of the Shrine of Meher Ali Shah**

### **Abstract**

Qawali is an Islamic devotional form of music invented and re-appropriated mainly by Chishtiyya Sufi order in the Indian sub-continent. Ever since qawali is an integral part of *samma* (ceremony). Thought not strictly limited to but a qawali is often performed at shrines. Sufis who came to sub-continent used qawali as a medium of intra-faith communication with local population. Not so surprisingly Sufis also produced literature, mainly lyrical poetry, on themes such as divine love, reunion, and miraculous interceding powers of the last apostle Muhammad (PBUH). Consequently, qawali emerged as a form of music eulogizing divine love and love for the last apostle. Sufis patronized qawali and *samma* because they anticipated the value of music in Indian culture. This paper argues that qawali is a catalyst to spiritual ecstasy, and even a culturally pluralistic audience is spiritually swayed by its quintessentially Islamic appeal and content. However, what distinguishes the spiritual music manifested in the performance of qawali are certain restrictions imposed from within Sufi orders to preserve its purity and to keep it in congruence with basic tenants of religion so that the spiritual realm, a qawali invoked, is not compromised through worldly deviations. Therefore, this paper will also analyze contents of *samma* (ceremony) celebration) conducted at the shrine of Mehar Ali Shah (a Chishtiyya saint) in order to read the complex configuration of the genre of qawali.

**Keywords:** Sub-continent, Local musical culture, Spiritual music, Religious festivals.

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## **Introduction**

In chishtiyah order Zikr and Saama hold a sacred ritualistic status. Saama is considered as one of the key modes for obtaining divine union, solace, and spiritual consummation.<sup>1</sup> According to Dr. Muhammad Fadil Khan "*Mehr e Munir*" singing in melodious voice is generally called *ghina* whereas listening to verses thus sung is commonly termed as Saama. Muhammad Tanvir Jamaal Chishti declares ecstasy as an important thing in Saama and it can be achieved through a high level of love-a form of communion-with Allah. He has also discussed three demands for Saama which were discussed by the esoteric Sufis in different periods of early Islamic Sufism and these are; time, place and company.<sup>2</sup> Kenneth S. Avery has also discussed early Sufi literature on Saama in his work entitled "*A Psychology of Early Sufi Saama*". Anne Mari Schimmel's work is equally remarkable and brief discussion on Saama in "*Mystical Dimension of Islam*". Schimmel presents Saama with its literal meaning "hearing", "to hear with the ear of the heart" and declared it as a source of increasing spiritual level. Carl W. Ernst, Shambhala guide to Sufism, has done work on Sufism and Saama with the reference of primary and secondary sources. Abdu Nasr al-Sarraj al-Tusi, a leading Sufi of the 10th century, regarded saama as the best practice of achieving spirituality in his book "*Kitab al-Luma' fil-Tasawwuf*". He divided saama in different sections like the importance of sweet voice, saama according to Quran, the tradition of the holy prophet, views of the Sufis, the degree of saama and the type of auditors. He has also given two types of Saama as well as auditors. One those who listen saama carelessly and second those who listen saama with full devotion and concentration. Abu Talib Al-Makki, a leading esoteric Sufi, has discussed the role of poetry in saama. He also presents some condition for auditors i.e. to make an ablution and wearing of clean clothes.<sup>3</sup> The book "*Kashf al Muhjub*" is basic source on the teachings of Ali bin Usman al Jullabi al Hujwiri in which saama has been discussed in detail and he preferred saama oversight or vision. He has also discussed two types of auditors i.e. first those who uses saama for increasing their devotion and second those who listen saama for satisfying their physical selves. He has cited the Quranic audition as being the best to understand saama. On the other hand, Abu Hamid Muhammad known as al-Ghazali an Islamic philosopher, intellectual and Sufi has categorically proscribed elements which could make saama an illegitimate or unlawful gathering. These included, women should not sing saama, some musical instruments like majamir, autar and kubah must not be used and neither un-islamic poetry should be used in in leading recitals. Indeed, on the contrary al-Ghazali has proscribed six types of songs lawful for samma:

1. The songs of pilgrims
2. Songs of warriors on the battlefield

3. Songs of lament
4. The songs of festivals (Eids, marriages and birthdays)
5. Songs of lovers which enhance one's love or relation with Allah
6. Songs which help one to know Allah

It is quite clear that Ghazli was not in favour of unorthodox elements replacing Islamic essence of samma. Al-Ghazali has also imposed the restrictions of time, place and brethren on saama. On the whole the emphasis was on creating an ambience in conjunction with human and Islamic ethos. As far as time is concerned, it must not be at prayer time, during meal or when the performers and auditors are mentally disturbed. Secondly, the place is very important and saama should not be arranged in a street, a road, dirty places, and in the house of a worldly defiled person. With regard to brethren or company, the non-muslims, worldly people, false believers and gossipers are not allowed to sit in Saama.<sup>4</sup> However, in India there have been examples of Hindus attending samma gatherings. Sufis in general have shown a certain degree of flexibility allowing people from different faith to attend samma. The founder of Qadriyya Order, Shaykh Abdul Qadir Jilani, even did not reject saama and supported that group who used it for increasing their spirituality.<sup>5</sup> All in all, different spiritual denominations have contributed towards aesthetic density of samma making sure that the sanctity and hallowed nature of this performative ritual is preserved against heretical temptations.

On the other hand, in Indo-Pak sub-continent, music was very popular among masses and from ancient times was a part and parcel of religious activities. Hindu religion was ridden by caste system, and was rigorously controlled by Brahmanic priesthood and elite thus there was no room for poor and marginalized masses to articulate their story. The Sufis readily identified this situation and more precisely Sufis of the Chishtiyya order and used music to attract the wretched of the Indian earth towards Islam. They were able to make inroads into the social fabric of other religions. Altogether, music was given a sacred status in the shape of Qawali with special focus on a poetry explicating veneration for and devotion to the persona of the last apostle. Consequently, Qawali became synonymous with holy and consecrated places. Sufis promoted good values and wrote poetic literature in order to attract native people. In this way, actually, they uplifted the poor people from the social dregs of neglect. Gradually, samma became an eclectic gathering, an amenable platform for incorporating downtrodden sections of Hindu society into a larger fold. But before that happened Sufis both practiced and propagated values such as equality, tolerance and brotherhood. So, they kept a balance between their words and deeds. As a result, religion of Islam was widely

accepted by the poor and marginalized people of the sub-continent Sufis wrote poetry which was recited in samma and each batch of verses had a seal of its creator. In fact, Sufi poetry was sung by auditors of qawali with a spiritual fervor. After the departure of Sufis from this world to next world, the *Sajjada Nashines* (successors) of their shrines continued with Qawali gatherings. Indeed, samma became an inimitable tradition of the culture of shrines. While there is no fanatic rejection of qawali by other Sufi orders Chishtiyya and Qadari order internalized it ever more staunchly and had added up to its aesthetic and philosophical value. Easily, samma is both a cherished and a continual heritage of Islamic Sufism. Up till the present majalis of Qawalis are a regular feature of sufi culture in India and Pakistan. According to Tehmina Iqbal "*Chishtiya order in broader perspective*",

"Spiritual poetry being a most pleasant expression of spiritual advancement has no match in the world. It is the poetry that makes available the most fascinating songs for Qawali gatherings. The Samma is the most widely known manifestation or mystical life in Islam. It is known as Sufi music. It is a great mystical tradition which has attained immense sacred status all over the sub continent. For centuries the Sufi community of the Indian sub continent has hold up this musical tradition, and it remains the central custom of Sufism to this day." <sup>6</sup>

Poetry has always been mystical and poets both in western and eastern tradition have been sublimated for mystical musings. But in the hands of sufis music and poetry became a symbiosis of aesthetics. . Additionally, samma added a finesse to poetry's mystical weight. Qawali became a kind of performativity but with a sacred intent. Sufis used the multifaceted Indian culture to their advantage and even appreciated mystical Hindu poets and used their poetry for its transcendental value. In Mughal era Muslims contributed greatly to music and even invented musical instruments. Indeed, Sufis' initiation of samma transformed the Indian culture, and redeemed it greatly from indignities of caste system based upon racial prejudices. The religious authoritarianism priesthood, and custodianship was challenged as shrine defied the idea of keeping with a conventional space of temple. A shrine hosting samma became a space enfolding everyone regardless of faith. Therefore, in Indian subcontinent through samma Sufis brought music, poetry, and Islamic religion closer enough making a trinity of spiritual, personal, and inter-communal harmony. No doubt where on one hand through repertory of qawali Sufis successfully extended their spiritual assets to native population they also contributed enormously to Indian body of musicology.

Dr. Carl W. Ernst has also written about Sufi music in his book "*Teachings of Sufism*". He says

"Listening to music is of three kinds: there is one kind for the common people, one kind for the Elite, and one kind for the Elite of the Elite. First kind listen with their

physical nature, that is begging, second listen with their hearts, that is seeking, and third listen with their souls, that is loving."

It can be said that Sufis gave priority to music of soul personified by Saama in order to activate man's link with his spiritual guide . . . In this regard, Chishtiyya order took precedence and laid the foundation of music which charms the soul. The founder of Chishtiyya order in the sub continent, Moin Ud Din Chishti initiated the tradition of Qawali. He composed spiritual verses. The Hindus were very fond of musical instruments, and had a nuanced understanding of music. Moin Ud Din used their music and musical instruments for his poetry steeped in spiritualism and that left an eternal impact on native Hindus. He integrated music into his teachings with the intention of bringing Hindus toward Islam. Amir Khusru was his disciple who was a theoretician, composer and founder of the rich Indo Muslim musical tradition. S.M. Ikram writes in "*A history of Muslim Civilization in India and Pakistan: A political and cultural history*",

"Amir Khusru started the process of synthesis, and raised the prestige of the art in the eyes of local Muslims; the interest of the Chishti Sufis in the art and its practical cultivation by them further insured its popularity."

Qawali in Chishtiyya order is not treated as a mere source of raw entertainment. For a perfect composition of qawali special attention is given to contents of poetry. Qutb Ud Din Bakhtiyar Kaki of Delhi was a renowned saint of Chishtiyya order and had a great passion for Saama. He died during listening Qawali in a state of extreme ecstasy. Among early Sufis Baba Farid Ud Din Ganj Shakar, Nizam Ud Din Olia, Ali Ahmed Sabir, Fakhar Ud Din Fakhar e Jahan gave equal importance to Qawali. In the thirteen century, the Chishtiyya Order was bifurcated into two branches, Chishtyia Nizamia and Chishtiyya Sabria. Chishtiyya Sabria went under the influence of Naqshbandi Order and the Reformer Ulema. Some Ulema from the reformist Naqshbandiyya Mujaddadiya and the puritanical Ahl-i-Hadis challenged the social and religious influence of the Sufi Saints in the Punjab and attacked the rituals practices at the Sufi shrines.<sup>7</sup> In other words there was a dissent uprising against qawali within the Chishtiyya order, and it was an extraordinary development. *Tariqa* (method) - as *samma* is form of *tariqa*- was pushed back by the so-called reformers with a view that Sharia (law) is in danger of losing dominance. At least, this wave of criticism restricted the larger and deeper influence *samma* has traditionally cast on its listeners and attendants. The reformers termed *samma* a Bida't (innovation) being practiced at shrines and advocated a more puritanical focus on Quran and Sunnah of the Holy Prophet. According to Eaton,

"Accordingly, supporters of these reformist movements sought to replace the shrine as the source of Islamic moral authority with a reassertion of the Book as the only legitimate source. Theatre, in word, was to be replaced by Scripture." <sup>8</sup>

In pre-colonial period, the reformist ulema criticized Qawali and the other related activities at Sufi shrines. During colonial period, shrines and its culture was severely criticized both by Reformist ulema and rationalist modernists. They targeted the authority and inspiration of Sufi proponents such as of shrine veneration and of different rituals of celebration. Moreover, people who took care of the affairs of shrines were also castigated as heretics. Meditational practices, *karamat* (miracle) and lavish ceremonies came under puritanical fire. During the nineteenth century, there was a crop of religious scholars influenced by western modernist thought who called themselves reformists: Deobandis, the Ahl-i-Hadis, Ulema of Nadvat al- Ulema of Lucknow, among many Sir Syed Ahmed Khan was a leading reformist. These scholars evaluated the rituals performed at shrines more meticulously and with a premeditated attention. The modernists belonging to Aligarh movement as well as orthodox ulema of the Ahl-i-Hadis used Ijtihad as a vehicle to cleanse religion from interpolations and innovations whereas the traditionalist Naqshbandis Chishti Sabri-Deobandis remained adhered the taqlid (following) of the Hanfi school of thought in jurisprudence and demanded large scale reforms in shrine culture. They did not outrightly rejected the shrine and its ethos. But they did not accept the miraculous powers of the saints and the mixing of cultural and religious elements.<sup>9</sup> While the culture of shrine was under attack by orthodox reformers on the other hand there were counter reformist movements represented by The Bareilvis, Ulema of Farangi Mahall and the Sajjada Nashines who tried to protect shrines and saints' personae and teachings. The revivalist Sufis or the later Sufis of the Chishtiya order Khwaja Noor Muhammad Maharvi, Khwaja Suleman Tonswi, Khwaja Shams Ud Din Sialvi and Pir Mehr Ali Shah instructed their disciples to adhere to the strict following of the Shariah in the light of Quran and Sunnah. They established religious institutions in which both the religious education of Shariah and Sufism was given. They also gave sacred status to the Qawali and took as source of spiritual gaining. How advocates of revivalism, of quasi -modernist thoughts, and most of all the actual successors of the tradition of qawali rescued it from total neglect and rejection can be seen from its performance at the shrine of Mehar Ali Shah. Mehar Ali Shah stands among those Sufis who have rendered their literary, religious, and political and social services to Muslim community. He wrote Urdu, Punjabi and Persian poetry and prose. He strongly refuted the claims of Mirza Ghulam Ahmed Qadiyani, an apostate and a blasphemous claimer of prophethood. . Mehar Ali Shah was the custodian of Khatam e Nabowat. He adopted the policy of noncooperation with the kings and the rulers. He helped the needy and poor masses by providing them food and shelter. He educated the young generation of his time by establishing religious

institution at Golra. Though he was not a regular poet but occasionally expressed his inner feelings and love for Holy Prophet, and his family and for Sufis. He belonged to the Chishtiyya order and regarded music and Qawali religiously permissible although not indispensable for the Sufis. In this way he adhered to basic sufi principle of flexibility. He used to sing verses of immanent poets to purify his heart. In his early life he listened Qawali with musical instruments but with the passage of time he switched over to Qawali without instruments. It is common perception among his disciples that when he attained the highest spiritual station of *Mushahidah* (observation) , and *Fana e Kamil* (annihilation) , he no longer remained in need of external factors for his mystical advancement. But in spite of this, the *Sajjada Nashins* of his shrine relied on Qawali for the benefit of their disciples. They believe that Qawali can confer sublime benefits on a person who seeks spiritual ends through it and it can further excite the supportive thoughts and feelings of one who looks for his own brand of pleasure from it. Clearly, Mehar Ali's Shah's attitude to qawali, with or without music, was purely devotional and open-ended. There was neither a strict rejection of music nor a strict adherence to it.

The supervision of Qawali by the Chishtiyya order contributed in multiple ways. Firstly they produced poetry in the language of native people sung by Qawals for spiritual overhauling of masses. Secondly they patronized genuinely talented musicians and singers. It's not simply the rulers but Sufis who fostered music as an art form. Thirdly, through Qawali as a tool they conveyed the basic message of Islam. Fourthly Qawali became a source of income for singers and musicians since they were rewarded by custodians of shrines in different ways. There turned out to be two categories of qawals those who made qawali their livelihood and those who purely performed for the love of Allah, Prophet (PBUH) , and *murshid* ( guide) In. Most of shrines began to have their Qawal parties and they sing at the shrines on regular basis. Meher Ali Shah had also his own Qawal who remained with him during his traveling to different places. Bakht Jamal was his regular Qawal who did Qawali during the period of Meher Ali Shah at Golra Sharif. During Qawali sessions, Meher Ali Shah remained in different conditions of *wajad* (trance ) and *saroor* (felicitation) . Usually, a saint on an elevated spiritual station exhibits various esoteric feelings in various ways; sometimes his eyes are drenched with tears, sometimes he goes semi-unconscious, and at times stands erected- all forms are manifestatins of love for Prophet Muhamams (PBUH). Her lies the basic idea of sufi doctrine of *hazir* (present) and *nazir* (invisible but seen). These are called *lateef kaifiyat* (subtle raptures) induced in a saint during a *samma*. These can also be termed as different spells, forms, and manifestations of ecstasy. The poetry immersed in praise of the last apostle sung by Qawals left deep impact upon on Mehar Ali Shah's inner being and often transport him to mystical realms.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, Mehar Ali Shah was immensely revered by fellows of his *silsla* (order) and by his contemporaries. The head of the shrine of Hazrat Khwaja Moin ud din chishti, Hazrat Diwan, Ghayath ud din, paid a visit to Golra and was impressed by erudition, piety and spiritual imminence of Meher Ali Shah. Mehar Ali Shaha was a complete religious scholar apart from being an immaculate Sufi. He lived in times of religious controversies. He travelled to Peshawar where he was challenged by local ulemas for a debate on the subject of Saama. Meher Ali Shah helped him out and took part in discussions on Saama. Near about fifty ulema of Peshawar with their pupils, admirers and references books such as Fatawa Tatar Khaniyah and Fatawa e Hammadiya which declared that *ghena* (music) was totally forbidden in Islam. Those who indulged in music are infidels. Meher Ali Shah presented his own analysis in the light of the various major schools like Asha'irah, Mataridiyah, Hanafiyah, Imamiyah, Zaidiyah and motizilahs. He then proceeded, first to endorse and then to contradict each of these viewpoints one by one. Therefore, his method was both inductive and deductive. It means that he could easily straddle between modernity and tradition and fare from both. At the end of the discussion the ulema of NWFP were convinced that their viewpoint was the same as Meher Ali Shah had, and that since Meher Ali Shah considered Sama to be permissible. In situations where *sharia* is pitted against *tasawwuf* those who are on path (*tariqa*) are guided by their *murshids* ( guides) and also by esteemed fellows of their order. Meher Ali Shah later stated that during his polemic with *ulemas* (religious scholars) the *tajili* (manifestation) Hazrat Khwaja Moin ud din of Ajmair embraced him enabling him to answer all the questions and objections raised on the ritual of samma.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, succession within the chain of an order is a very important aspect of sufi path. It was Ghulam Mohyuddin Shah known as Babuji (1891-1974) Mehar Ali Shah's son who succeeded his father's *musnud* ( spiritual seat) in 1937, and formally became the custodian of shrine. He ran the spiritual throne of Golra for thirty seven years i.e. 1937 to 1974. He had learned the art of tajvid (reciting the Quran in accordance with established rules of pronunciation and intonation). He also engaged with renowned scholars like Abdul Rehman of Jawnpur, Mawlana Muhammad Ghazi at Golra and with set up a library comprising six thousand books. He gained spiritual direction through his father Mehar Ali Shah. Mehar Ali Shah granted permission to Babuji to take vows (*bai'at* ) from people. He established the tradition of periodic functions (Urs celebrations, ashura, milad-un-Nabi). On these occasions, he often arranged devotional music like Qawali, at the shrine of Mehr Ali Shah for enhancement of spirituality. Therefore, the tradition of qawali continued uninterrupted.

But that does not mean that the conditions which had been raised by the earlier Sufis for legitimacy of the Saama were not fully observed. The restrictions of time, place and brethren was given equal importance. As far as time was concerned, the



qawali was arranged from 10.00 am to 12.00 pm on regular basis after that lunger (food) is served to masses. After the distribution of lunger, the prayer time is fully observed. The venue or place of the qawali was also specifically the shrine. With regard to brethren, the people listened qawali as a part of worship with full devotion. Similarly, Bakht Jamal was replaced by Haji Mehboob Qawal. He was well versed in Persian, Urdu and Punjabi. Though he was not regular qawal but always considered the blessing of Meher Ali Shah making him a good musician and a singer. He spent his whole life at the shrine of Golra and did duty for enhancing the spiritual journey of the followers of the shrine. He recited the poetry of renowned sufi poets such as Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi, Mawlana Abdul Rehman Jami, Shaikh Sa'adi, Mawlana Hafiz Shirazi, Amir Khusro, Allama Muhammad Iqbal and Ghulam Mu'inuddin (son of Babuji). He had also remained under the tutelage of Ali Bakhsh Qawal of Hyderabad.<sup>12</sup> Babuji always used Qawals and the Qawali for enhancing his spirituality and austerity. Mehboob Qawal proved himself the singer of two generations of Meher Ali Shah and after the death of Babuji, he also sang in the period of Ghulam Mu'inuddin (1920-1997). Ghulam Mu'inuddin was born in 1920 during the period of Meher Ali Shah and known as Lalaji. He was also a poet and used the title of Mushtaq in poetry. His Urdu and Persian verses are often recited in Qawali at Golra. Mahboob Ali and Mushtaq Ali Qawals also recited his poetry in the Qawali sittings. During the period of Ghulam Mu'inuddin, Mehboob Qawal said goodbye to Qawali due to his age factor and Mushtaq Ahmed replaced him as Qawal of Golra Shrine. Mushtaq was not as melodious as was Mehboob Qawal. After the death of Ghulam Mu'inuddin (12th March 1997), his younger brother replaced him as Sajjada Nashine of Golra Shrine according to his will. Shah Abdul Haq was born on 1926 and known as Chotta Lalaji. He has maintained the traditions of his elders and organizes the Qawali sittings on daily basis in which the poetry of Sufis such as Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi, Mawlana Abdul Rehman Jami, Shaikh Sa'adi, Mawlana Hafiz Shirazi, Amir Khusro, Allama Muhammad Iqbal, Ghulam Mu'inuddin (son of Babuji) and Ghulam Nasir ud Din is recited. Presently, Bhola Qawal and his companions present their services in the Qawali sittings that are known as Majlis. It is common belief that Meher Ali Shah also joins the Majlis spiritually and the participants enjoy the spiritual presence of the Sufi. Qawali is a form of worship at the shrine of Golra and the devotees give special importance to Majlis. At the Urs celebrations, the Sajjada Nashine and his sons Ghulam Moin ul Haq, Syed Qutab ul Haq Shah, the sons of Ghulam Mu'inuddin (Syed Jalal ud Din, Pir Nasir ud Din, Ghulam Hassam ud Din and his nephews also participate in the Qawali sittings. Qawali has become a source of spirituality and austerity at the shrine of Golra. The Bhola Qawal and his companions are not as expert in Qawali singing as Mehboob Ali and Mushtaq Ali were but they perform with the blessings of the Sufis of Golra. On the whole, the organization and care with which each successor realized the tenability of samma speaks for its value.

With each succeeding generations of sufis the gathering of samma integrated with the collective spiritual body of the shrine. There was no contention that an *urs* (celebration) would be without qawali. Infact, Chishtyya order made qawali an integral component of samma. Sufis like Mehar Ali Shah enriched the hearts and souls of people with poetry and music suffused with themes of hijar (separation) and wasal (union). Moreover, Maher Ali Shah and Sufis of all orders largely kept themselves at distance from politics/court. They took it as their mission of purifying people's inner selves through beatific verses and exalted notes of music. The significance of samma and the need to achieve ecstatic union is also manifested through dance hence the whirling dervishes of Maulana Rumi is another form of spiritual observance. Music, dance and poetry off and on declared illegitimate by ulemas but in the hands of Sufis became trusted vehicles of disseminating love peace and harmony. Ironically, in the western world Islam is brushed with fetishes such as Islamphobia and no wonder if the west understands the genre of qawali and the significances of samma and its openness to welcome a pluralistic audience much of the hatred and prejudice can be replaced with joy and love. Samma is a space permeated with joy and love. Qawali by using poetry written to praise Muhammad (PBUH) transcends devotees to a state of an inimitable spirituality.

## Notes & References

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